



Time for Action:

Inclusion of Gender and SRHR in Climate Action

Regional Advocacy Brief For Gender-Responsive Climate Action In Asia

This brief is the culmination of two sub-regional consultations organised by the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) in 2022 with 35 civil society organisations (CSOs) in South and South East Asia including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

These CSOs work on issues of climate change, gender and SRHR, and represent diverse identities including but not limited to women, SOGIESC, young people, women with disabilities and indigenous peoples. These CSOs discussed and defined the regional priorities on the intersections of climate change, gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), with an aim to demand accountability from decision makers at various national, regional and global spaces that negotiate and decide climate actions.

The findings and demands will also be disseminated at the upcoming 27th Conference of Parties (COP27).

Overview

The Asia-Pacific region is at the forefront of experiencing the impact of climate change and its related disasters, with climate change acknowledged as a global threat (IPCC-AR5 2014a). Most countries in the region are vulnerable to climate risks and disasters, and many countries in the region are located at the top of the most vulnerable countries in the world according to the global risk report assessments (IPCC-AR5 2014b). According to the estimates by the UNESCAP Asia-Pacific Disaster Report in 2019, the Asia and Pacific region has its annual loss of \$675 billion due to climate-induced disasters.¹ The ramifications of climate change also impact food security and trigger conflicts over key resources: arable land, water, food and energy sources.

While climate change affects everyone, the impact is not gender-neutral. People of diversified gender identities and its intersectional identities such as indigenous women, women and girls with disabilities, those with limited financial means, poor education, limited access to technology and other resources, and residing in hazard-prone areas are disproportionately susceptible to the adverse impacts of climate change.² These disproportionate impacts are a manifestation of gender inequality, which underscores climate solutions with a poor gender lens.³ This pre-existing inequality stems from a complex interplay of social, cultural, legislative and institutional factors creating barriers for climate-resilient societies with people of diversified gender identities, as equal partners, and beneficiaries,⁴ and are amplified during climate change and climate disasters.

The capacities and vulnerabilities of people of diversified gender identities vary depending on age, ethnicity, marital and socio-economic status, caste, class, minority as well as ability status and educational levels. In the context of climate change, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in particular, gets further deteriorated due to deprioritisation during humanitarian crisis, despite being inextricably linked.⁵

Moreover, voices from the region are disproportional, and representation at various global platforms are scarce and limited. CSOs participation in key advocacy spaces are extremely limited and not equitable, as most hold only observer status and are excluded in the negotiations. Meaningful, inclusive and sustained CSO participation at the global and regional processes is critical, as there is a lack of inclusive and meaningful participation of people

of diversified gender identities in decision-making spaces, despite their vital role in shaping responses to the climate crises, climate-resilient societies, and effective, inclusive climate actions. Though the commitments have been made at the national level to key international agreements including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Sendai Framework, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Agenda 2030 (SDGs), to ensure gender mainstreaming in policy frameworks, and the implementation of the Gender Action Plan (GAP)* that was derived from the UNFCCC's Paris Agreement, the effects are not reflected in the national policies and programmes. Such inaction and delay further exacerbate gender inequality in times of crises.

States must implement their commitments to gender equality and uphold SRHR when responding to the climate crisis, and ensure inclusive and meaningful participation of the most affected and marginalised communities in decisions related to climate change at all levels of the planning, development, implementation and monitoring processes. This includes but is not limited to meaningful participation of people of diversified gender identities in negotiation and decision-making spaces including spaces like the Conference of Parties (COP). The decisions at COP must reflect the demands of progressive CSOs with grassroots-specific knowledge that can contribute to gender analysis and policy development. The gender-specific needs of people of diversified gender identities to adapt and build resilience to climate change need to be prioritised.

It is important to incorporate gender, disability and indigeneity considerations, gender-responsive and intersectional approaches, and SRHR in the planning and implementation of climate related outcomes and decisions and ensure they are reflected in national level policies and plans. Understanding the lived realities and experiences of people of diversified gender identities and gender inequality as the root cause of gender-differentiated vulnerabilities will enable institutions and policymakers to ensure no one is left behind.

* With inclusion of universal access to comprehensive SRHR

Impact of Climate Crisis on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in South Asia and Southeast Asia

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION (CSE)

Harmful socio-cultural norms, values and traditional practices such as gender-ascribed roles, household food hierarchy systems, and the lack of decision-making power prevent people of diversified gender identities from accessing and utilising health care services and education including access to CSE, while at the same time expanding social and economic marginalisation. These harmful gender roles not only force young girls to drop out of schools, but also deprive them from having an education and earning an income, while at the same time exposing them to physical and sexual violence.⁶ Though there have been systematic efforts to implement CSE in many countries in the region, there are still barriers and challenges to implementing CSE in the curriculum due to cultural norms and stigma.⁷ For example, in Nepal, when climate extreme events happen, oftentimes young girls are among the first to be affected to the extent that they are forced to drop out of school. Parents withdraw their daughters from schools so that they could either help out at home or on the farm, or to find a job to supplement the household's income due to the increasing workload in the household and economic hardship experienced by the family.⁸ This in turn limits their access to information including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), hindering their empowerment. In addition to this, the subject of CSE is still a taboo in many countries in the region resulting in the lack of sensitisation among educators, as well as parents, on the subject.⁹ As indigenous women and girls are at higher risk of climate change impacts, their access to CSE is further challenged, therefore community targeted CSE needs to be promoted.

CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS (CEFMU)

Child, early and forced marriage and unions is still an accepted social practice in many countries in the region despite being banned by law. The climate crisis further exacerbates this practice. When extreme weather events destroy livelihoods, the financial distress of local communities and families can lead them to consider marrying girl children as a coping strategy.

Studies in Bangladesh¹⁰ and Nepal¹¹ have found that families practice child marriage among their young daughters as means to escape poverty brought about by extreme weather events. Child marriage increases the risk of early pregnancy which makes the girls more susceptible to placental tears, obstruction at the time of delivery, leading to maternal mortality.¹²

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

During climate crisis, we also see an increase in sexual and gender-based violence. Women and girls in all their diversities who are mainly responsible for collecting water, food and firewood have to travel greater distances for them, making them vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence including sexual harassment, rape and other forms of violence. People of diversified gender identities are also vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence while living in temporary shelters and camps when they have to leave their homes during climate change disasters. An example from Pakistan showed that women and girls, especially pregnant women, lack privacy at the shelters and in toilets and face harassment and attempted gender-based violence in camps. However, rigid gender cultural norms and traditional notions of honour have prevented these incidents from being reported and women from raising their voices. These experiences were detrimental to the mental health of the people of diversified gender identities who developed depression, anxiety and fear.¹³ People of diversified gender identities, including women and girls, are also vulnerable to human trafficking during climate disasters, especially sexual exploitation and forced labour.¹⁴ A study on sexual and gender-based violence during disaster situations in Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines, revealed that child marriage and domestic violence occur more frequently in the immediate aftermath of the disasters.¹⁵

EXCLUSION OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

Climate change and SRHR are inextricably linked. Comprehensive SRHR services are largely missing in climate related discourses, programmes and implementations at all levels. Despite the need, contraceptives, safe abortion services, and comprehensive sexuality education are not part of any humanitarian packages. Bodily autonomy and access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services are integral to gender equality and building climate-resilient societies. In the most recent Glasgow Climate Pact¹⁶ that was issued at the 26th Conference of Parties in 2021, the focus on gender and health was limited and SRHR was not included. Despite the many disadvantages that women in all their diversities face in the region, these experiences are not considered in decision-making processes, specifically climate-related discourses and decisions. In addition to this, these discourses and decisions have failed to take into account the impacts of climate change on the SOGIESC* community, who are frequently marginalised in the region. This is because diverse genders beyond the binary of heteronormativity are not acknowledged legally, thus neglecting their needs in climate action policies and programmes.¹⁷ The community is more severely impacted by the climate crises due to the discrimination, neglect and marginalisation they face, further compounding their vulnerability.¹⁸ Hence, an intersectional lens is imperative to climate justice in order to address the issues on the nexus between climate change, gender and SRHR. It is integral to have bodily autonomy and access to sexual and reproductive health services to achieve gender equality and build climate-resilient societies.

LIMITED MENTION OF GENDER AND EXCLUSION OF SRHR

In recent years, many countries in South and South East Asia have natural disasters response plans and policies. However, in many of these policies and plans, gender and SRHR are significantly limited or explicitly excluded.

Recent scoping studies carried out by ARROW, with support from UN Women, showed that the policy landscape on gender, climate change and disaster risk reduction, especially in countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia and Vietnam, is diverse and quite focused on the top-down

approach of driving gender-responsive action. Many domestic policies emanate from key international commitments and there are efforts to mainstream gender in the national policy frameworks. The benefits, however, have not trickled down and gender-based inequalities in the climate change context exist at the grassroots level. In National Policy frameworks, key gender-specific issues such as sexual and reproductive health, disability and gender-based violence get skipped very easily from planning processes and often have to be traded-off with competing priorities.¹⁹

A study in Cambodia has found that technical documents and strategies for gender mainstreaming at policy level are inadequate, and the ones that exist do not have sufficient practical information. There is a lack of coordination to address gender equality in climate change and disaster risk reduction (DRR) and commonly agreed terminology and understanding of gender equality in the context of climate change and disaster risk reduction.²⁰ The Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan (CCCSP) 2014-2023 is a key national policy instrument for climate change that falls under the responsibility of the Department of Climate Change (DCC). To implement the CCCSP, 14 sectoral Climate Change Action Plans (CCAPs) were developed with the indicators of success being the involvement of vulnerable groups, including women, minority groups and children.²¹ However, gender, gender equality or women's needs and priorities are not mentioned in the CCAP.²²

In Vietnam, the policy processes are not backed by evidence-based advocacy and in-depth research about gender. Gender analysis is often missing from strategies. Stakeholder engagement is limited to some experts who may not know details of ground level vulnerabilities. The Law on Gender Equality 2006 and the National Strategy on Gender Equality (2011-2020) requires gender mainstreaming in all policy development, as the government has committed to gender equality in climate change response and disaster risk management. However, gender mainstreaming and gender equality in climate change and DRR responses and frameworks is not explicitly documented.²³

Since 2013, the national Climate Change and Gender Action Plan for Bangladesh (ccGAP) is among the many policies the country has introduced for disaster management and recognition of gender issues. These policies that are focused on women's vulnerabilities instead of resilience, limiting their access to information, services and decision-making spaces, also excludes diverse genders and SRHR.²⁴

* Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

In climate change and DRR policies in the Philippines, terms like women and gender are mentioned, though without explicit roles and implementation, and SRHR is not mentioned²⁵ and seen in silos as a health issue. A study²⁶ by CARE International and the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities (ICSC) in the Philippines has shown that gender equality is not a key objective of the different adaptation-related projects that are funded from international sources, and the vulnerability assessments lack gender analyses, and therefore result in projects with limited transformative potential in terms of gender equality and empowerment.

As also seen in Nepal, the climate policy,²⁷ Gender Action Plan,²⁸ Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA)²⁹ and National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA)³⁰ excludes SRHR and there is limited evidence generated on the linkage between gender, SRHR and climate crises in the country. Even at the global level, gender integration is still amiss in climate policies with only six out of 50 reviewed Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) containing references to SRHR. This analysis is based on various monitoring initiatives by IUCN, Care About Climate as well as the Gender Climate Tracker³¹ of the Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO) that monitors the strengths and weaknesses of gender within individual NDCs of countries in the region.

People of diversified gender identities are disadvantaged and vulnerable due to limited access to resources and decision-making power that is brought on by historical discrimination and patriarchal structures. This is a major challenge in the plan to create climate-resilient societies with women and girls as equal partners and beneficiaries.

ZERO OR LIMITED ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES AND INFORMATION DURING CLIMATE DISASTERS

When vital infrastructure, such as clinics and highways, are disintegrated by extreme weather events, especially with floods and landslides, the access to sexual and reproductive health services can be obstructed, leading to negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. For people of diversified gender identities who are displaced and living in humanitarian settings, lack of access to SRH services is the leading cause of death. Disasters hit women, girls, and people of diversified gender identities harder over both the immediate and long term as they are often poorer than men and yet may have larger burdens of care.

This can be seen in the low utilisation of reproductive health services during climate disasters in Laos, especially in rural areas, contributing to higher maternal and neonatal and infant mortality rates,³² while health care services are not available on all islands in the Maldives, forcing women living in the outlying islands to travel to another island that has gynecologists and offers these services.³³ In the Philippines, there is limited SRHR-friendly facilities in *barrios* and *barangays*, especially for the youth and young key affected population, neglecting the special needs and vulnerabilities of young people during emergencies. In addition to this, marginalised communities such as fishers in the country, are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change due to lack of SRHR services, especially contraceptive services.³⁴ Women in the Sindh province in Pakistan had more difficulty in seeking health services compared to men during displacement due to the unavailability of women doctors in the camps or shelters, preventing women from seeking health services, particularly SRH services. On top of that, women are also not allowed to leave their temporary shelter on their own to either access health services or to get food even within the camp area unless they are accompanied either by their husband or male relatives, as attributed to the cultural practice and strict male dominance in the province.³⁵

Disaster relief packages and humanitarian aid provided during climate extreme events do not consider the needs of people with diversified gender identities. Comprehensive SRH services including the ones that are time sensitive, for example services for women experiencing gynecological problems and pregnancy complications, are not available.³⁶ This is also seen at present in the ongoing pandemic and worsening climate crises, where access and availability of resources and services are impacted.³⁷

It is crucial that an intersectional lens is adopted at all levels in the planning and development of inclusive, meaningful and sustainable policies, programmes and implementations, to ensure that no one is left behind.

Recommendations for COP27 and Relevant National, Regional and Global Decision-Making Spaces

- 1. Our governments should fulfill their commitments to human rights.** This includes upholding human rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, of all people and acknowledge its co-benefits in contributing to climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience. Acknowledge sexual and reproductive health by implementing a gender-responsive and transformative approach while addressing structural barriers and unequal social norms to promote gender equity.
- 2. Climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes must be developed and implemented** with an intersectional, equitable lens, and a human rights- based approach. This also means applying human rights, gender and a social-justice based approach to climate action that includes the full range of SRHR, and to commit robust and feminist financing for the climate and SRHR intersection.³⁸
- 3. Ensure that national action plans and policies, programming and budget related to climate change, health, and disaster risk reduction incorporate gender mainstreaming and SRHR** and include gender-differentiated impact analysis of climate change disasters and gender equality. SRHR must be incorporated as a key component of environmental, climate change, and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, to ensure their success and support the achievement of gender equality and the fulfillment of the right to health.³⁹
- 4. To advance SRHR, gender equality interventions must address the structural barriers embedded in norms, laws, and policies** that contribute to inequality and injustice.⁴⁰ This is in addition to addressing the structural and systemic factors including repealing and abolishing discriminatory practices and policies that exacerbate gender inequality.⁴¹ This includes recognising the needs of gender diverse people and providing SRH services and facilities that cater to them.
- 5. Climate resilient health systems that are more likely to support and ensure SRH services in times of crisis or disaster should be prioritised.**⁴² Sustainable, accessible, and resilient health systems that serve the specific SRH needs of all women and girls and gender diverse people, whether for contraception, antenatal care, safe abortion, are needed that are required to fulfil the right to health and to build adaptive capacity and strengthen resilience to direct and indirect climate impacts.
- 6. Support, including funding and resources, should also be provided to civil society organisations (CSOs) to create awareness on the importance of climate-resilient health care services** that are affordable, accessible and easily available to women and girls in all their diversities, especially those who are vulnerable to climate extreme events.⁴³ This includes ensuring the provision of SRH products, services and information such as the provision of reusable sanitary napkins, contraception, safe menstrual hygiene programmes and SRH services for women, girls and gender diverse communities, as well as youth-friendly spaces. CSOs should also be supported in their advocacy to increase awareness on harmful practices like gender-prescribed roles and child marriage.
- 7. Provide capacity building to local governments and stakeholders** regarding emergency preparation, policy formulation, and prioritising of marginalised people of intersecting identities in response, and incorporating SRHR commodities in emergency. This is in addition to building the capacity of stakeholders to monitor commitments of governments and hold them accountable.
- 8. Ensure effective implementation of UNFCCC Gender Action Plan (GAP)** as part of climate action. The States should ensure that SRHR is integrated into GAP activities.
- 9. Ensure the participation, engagement and representation of indigenous and marginalised communities with intersecting identities** in negotiations and decision-making spaces, including at COP, to ensure gender and SRHR are reflected in all pillars of climate discourses.
- 10. Promote free education, including comprehensive sexuality education, for young people** and ensure that parents are sensitised on the importance of education. Financial assistance should also be provided during extreme climate events and disasters to ensure girls are able to have an education and are not forced into early marriage.⁴⁴

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